

How to Prepare an Advance Letter? The ESS Experience in Poland

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When we send advance letters to the sampled persons in a survey, we expect that the recipients will read them and, based on the information provided, will decide on their participation in the survey. Therefore, the letter is expected to play an important role paving the way for the interaction with the interviewer. Findings from in-depth interviews with hard refusers from ESS 3 (2006) and ESS 4 (2008) presented in this paper indicate that such individuals are generally not interested in the mailing received and can hardly remember anything from it. The paper also shows how, following the findings of this research, the advance letters in subsequent ESS rounds in Poland were modified in order to generate recipients' interest and drive participation.

Key words: survey; advance letter; non-respons.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

An advance letter, or at least a postcard, is a standard tool in face-to-face (F2F) surveys conducted on a sample of persons or households/addresses. This effort is based on a rational assumption that before a stranger (i.e. an interviewer) comes to visit, the sampled person should be warned of such a visit and informed of the survey sponsor and the overall goals of the survey. The letter which, unlike a postcard, is personalised (i.e. prepared for a specific survey) creates an opportunity to convey more details, including an opportunity to inform the potential participants of the topics covered by the survey. Therefore, one could expect that the door-step interaction will be largely guided by the sampled person's previous knowledge in this regard. Naturally, this expectation is based on the assumption that the sampled persons who receive a mailing will also behave rationally, i.e. that they will read

the letter and think about their decision regarding survey participation. How does the researcher's rationality fit with the sampled persons' rationalities? To what extent does the advance letter meet its intended functions and how should it be prepared to fulfil those functions as much as possible? In this paper I will describe the perspective of the sampled persons: their behaviours and other reactions after receiving the advanced letter. I will also show how, being aware of those reactions, the Polish team modified the advance letters between subsequent rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) to make sure that they fulfilled their role more effectively.

The body of research on advance letters and their role for the response rate achieved in surveys is relatively limited, which may come as a surprise considering the costs involved in such mailings. Moreover, results of research on the subject are not entirely clear. There is considerable research evidence that advance letters generally increase the response rate in surveys by a few percentage points (up to a dozen or so), at least in telephone interviews (Dillman, Gallegos, and Frey 1976; Traugott, Groves and Lepkowski 1987). This stems mostly from reduction of refusals (Mann 2005). Some studies, however, found that advance letters had no effect on the final response rate (Singer, Van Hoewyk and Maher 2000).

Moreover, an opposite effect ('backfire effect') is also possible, albeit not empirically confirmed: if a sampled person is warned about a survey, he or she may be better prepared to refuse once the interviewer calls (Groves and Couper 1998; Stoop 2005). In surveys held in recent years, increases in response rates driven by advance letters have been relatively low i.e. a few percentage points. This may indicate that effectiveness of this tool declines over time (Hembroff et al. 2005; Link and Mokdad 2005, Mann 2005). Effectiveness of an advance letter may also vary across subgroups (Link and Mokdad 2005).

The contents of the advance letter also influences its role in lifting the response rate. Most agree that the advance letter should not contain too many details about the topics of the survey. The letter should stimulate interest but not provide an exhaustive list of topics to be covered (Dillman 2000). This aim forces advance letter writers to choose several options, each of which influences response rate. The first is length of the letter. If the advance letter is short, its chances for being read improve. However, a longer letter may signal an important message (Dillman, Gallegos, and Frey 1976; Dillman 2000; Groves and Couper 1998). Another factor is the authority of the sponsor and of the person signing the letter (Brunner and Carroll 1969; Groves and Couper 1998). In that case the letter talks about 'a reward' for participating in the survey: a feeling that one is part of an important undertaking (Dillman 2000).

A successful advance letter must first be received and then read by the sampled person, yet a study conducted by Link and Mokdad (2005) shows that 26.6% of the

respondents claimed they never received an advance letter and 12.6% answered 'don't know'. It is possible that they did not receive the letter personally. Couper, Mathiowetz and Singer (1995) demonstrated in their research that in approximately half of all households one member sorts the mail before reading and more than 60% throw away some mail without reading it (though, this rarely applies to personally addressed letters). Another possibility is that the sampled persons simply do not read the advance letter or do not remember it. They might, as noted by Groves and Couper (1998), only inspect it briefly in order to check whether this is a bill or an offer of some benefit for the household. If not, may throw it away.

DATA

The analysis of the sampled persons' reactions to the advance letter will be based mostly on the results of qualitative research (in-depth interviews, or IDIs, and dyads), conducted with hard refusers in ESS rounds 3 and 4. In Poland, the ESS is conducted using the PAPI technique on a sample of individuals aged 15+, drawn from official registers (Department of Governmental Records and ICT in Warsaw). ESS 3 was conducted from October till December 2006, whereas ESS 4 was fielded between November 2008 and January 2009. Both survey rounds followed a rigorous research design, aimed at maximising the response rate. Those efforts went beyond a long fieldwork period: advance letters were mailed before the fieldwork period, unconditional gifts were prepared for the sampled persons, interviewers and co-ordinators of regional interviewer networks took part in a face-to-face briefing session covering also a training in door-step interaction and refusal conversion. Moreover, an incentive system for interviewers was applied, covering both financial and non-financial rewards. Throughout the fieldwork period the interviewers' work was monitored and systematically controlled in the field. The response rate in ESS 3 reached 70.4% whereas it was 71.2% in ESS 4.

Recruitment for the qualitative study among hard refusers after ESS 3 was related to the follow-up survey. Approximately one month after completion of ESS fieldwork a questionnaire was mailed to all non-respondents and converted refusers. The questionnaire repeated a few questions from the ESS survey and, in the case of non-respondents, contained a question about the reasons behind non-response.

Each mailing came with an attached gift and an invitation to participate in a qualitative study (QS). It asked 'to take part in a conversation about participation and non-participation in surveys' which would take ca. 2 hours.

Individuals who expressed willingness to take part in the qualitative study were asked to complete an application form, providing their full name, e-mail address, mailing address and telephone number. We ensured that those data would not be

associated with responses given to the mail questionnaire. The proposed incentive for participation in the study was ca. EUR 25, which constituted approx. 7% of the average monthly pay in Poland at that time. The would-be interviewees were given a choice: the interview could be held in their own home or in one of a number of research facilities in Poland. In the latter case reimbursement of travel costs was also offered. In total, completed mail questionnaires were returned by 192 non-respondents (24.2% of all those mailed).

The QS consent form was completed by 17 hard refusers and 3 converted refusers from various regions of Poland. We contacted those persons a few times in order to agree the time and place of the interview, to keep up their motivation and clarify doubts. During that communication 8 persons withdrew their consent and one person turned out to be mentally ill. Two other individuals did not turn up for the agreed appointment. In total, 9 people took part in the qualitative study: 7 refusers and 2 converted refusers. Due to geographic dispersion and difficulties in agreeing a convenient appointment we ultimately held 1 dyad and 8 IDIs instead of the previously intended mini-groups. The interviews were conducted between 10th and 20th of April 2007.

This paper is based on materials collected from hard refusers and one converted refuser. The latter was a secondary school student who finally agreed to take part in the ESS only as a result of strong pressure exerted by his parents. Overall, the qualitative study (QS) participants represented various ages and levels of education, varied work status and domiciles of different sizes. Despite our initial concerns, we did not see a significant dominance of individuals who decided to take part in our qualitative study mostly for financial considerations (in particular, this refers to pensioners and unemployed individuals).

As mentioned earlier, the second qualitative study was conducted in connection with ESS 4. Recruitment began approximately two weeks after completion of the ESS 4 fieldwork. However, a different procedure was applied this time as it turned out that the previous study (after ESS 3) had numerous weaknesses. Firstly, recruitment in the QS after ESS 3 was limited to individuals who returned the mail questionnaire. Meanwhile, as confirmed by the study conducted after ESS 4, many hard refusers do not take part in any surveys at all, whether face-to-face or postal mode. Secondly, the study after ESS 3 was effectively based on respondent self-selection, i.e. it included individuals who volunteered to take part in it. Thirdly, it turned out that many people, especially hard refusers, are very reluctant to disclose their personal details whereas provision of such details was required in the declaration attached to the mail questionnaire in the previous rounds.

With the objectives of the present study in mind, recruitment covered only hard refusers, i.e. individuals who flatly refused to take part in the ESS 4 when talking to the interviewer (excluding proxy refusals). Selection was made on the basis

of interviewers' notes in individual cards prepared for the sampled persons. As recruitment was performed by telephone, it only covered cases where the sampled person's telephone number was available (obtained from that person or via proxy). This helped us to mitigate the self-selection procedure. Recruitment was based on a specially developed script consulted with an experienced interviewer who was very effective in soliciting consents.

We used two recruiters who were purposefully selected for their style of communication with the respondents. One of them was a very down-to-earth and concrete person who confined the recruitment interview to the necessary minimum. This may have worked well with some respondents. Practice showed that this recruitment style was, indeed, effective in many cases: some QS participants stressed the matter-of-fact approach as an advantage. The second person conducted recruitment using a socio-emotional style. After soliciting consent, the potential respondent's contact details were passed to the moderator who agreed on a specific date and place of the interview.

Given the objectives of this study (identification of other categories of refusers, if any, and a better understanding of reasons behind refusals for those who do it without thinking much), recruitment was limited to individuals of economically active age (most of them working) and youth aged over 15, with at least secondary education, from urban areas. Earlier non-response analysis identified those as the 'toughest' categories of non-respondents who are most difficult to contact.

When presenting the interview, the prospective participants were told that researchers sought to talk to some people sampled for the European Social Survey on topics such as their opinions about surveys, interviewers and their work, the advance letters prepared by the survey team, previous participation in surveys and related experience. We suggested that the interviews could take place at the respondents' home or in a room at a research institute (in order to address safety concerns, we provided the address immediately after obtaining consent, i.e. well in advance). The respondents were offered the equivalent of approx. EUR 40 for their participation plus reimbursement of travel costs (in cases where interviews were conducted in a research facility).

Overall, we contacted 44 refusers, out of which 15 agreed to take part in an in-depth interview. In that case the recruiter completed a specially designed screening questionnaire. For our QS we recruited young and middle-aged people, with secondary or higher education, living in medium-sized or large cities (or small satellite towns), hired workers and self-employed individuals.

Three qualitative researchers from SMG/KRC MillwardBrown acted as moderators. Before the start of the QS the moderators underwent a training where the goals of the study and research hypotheses were discussed and the interview guide was presented in detail.

The QS was conducted between 7th of March and 19th of May 2009. However, the vast majority of the interviews (11) were conducted in March, i.e. within a relatively short time after completion of the ESS fieldwork, when the participants were still able to remember the events related to that survey. A total of three interviews were conducted in April and only one followed in May.

THE INITIAL STAGE: ADVANCE LETTER IN ESS ROUNDS 1 AND 2

When preparing the advance letter before ESS rounds 1 and 2, we assumed that the letter should address all possible questions and concerns that the sampled persons might have. As all potentially important details could not fit into a single page, the letter consisted of two pages. Below presented is the scanned first page of the advance letter (in English translation).

According to the aforementioned course book standards, the letter was prepared on official stationery with the letterhead of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences. This was intended to highlight the name of the survey sponsor: a prestigious academic/research institution. Additionally, the ESS logo was added at the top. In view of the European aspirations displayed by the Polish society (ESS 1 was conducted in 2002, before the EU accession whereas ESS 2 was conducted in 2004 i.e. the year when Poland officially joined the European Union), it seemed reasonable to assume that a European survey would generate positive connotations. Those positive connotations were also invoked by the first sentence of the letter. However, given the limited research funding, neither of the two logos was printed in colour.

The first page of the letter contained essential information about the survey. However, according to the aforementioned rules of practice, the range of topics covered by the survey was described only in general terms. On the other hand, the letter emphasised elements which could potentially give rise to concerns and, as such, influence the sampled person's decisions, i.e. random sampling, importance of everyone's participation and confidentiality of findings. The first page informed the recipients of the planned interviewer call and contained contact details of survey organisers. The latter was important in view of the earlier experience with advance letters: after they were mailed, a few dozen sampled persons called to check the survey sponsor and institutional affiliation of the interviewer.

The ESS website address was included in the letter with the same purpose in mind. The sampled persons were given an opportunity to see for themselves that the people who signed the letter were, indeed, involved in the project. Another idea was to show that the ESS was an important and prestigious study.

The last sentence contained a request for the sampled persons (if they were minors) to show the letter to their parents – this element was necessitated by the Polish civil code provisions.



Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences



Warsaw, 4 October 2004

Dear Madam,

You have been randomly drawn to participate in an international survey which aims to collect opinions from members of the public about a variety of topics that are important for Poland and Europe as a whole. The first round of this survey was conducted in Poland and 22 European countries in 2002. The second round which is now being conducted will cover 30 countries across Europe, including Poland. The survey is designed to help understand where societies from different countries have similar views and opinions and where they differ. The survey is funded from European resources.

The survey questionnaire covers a variety of topics but no specialist knowledge or any particular information is needed to answer the questions. Your name has been randomly drawn using statistical methods which ensure representativeness of opinions for people living in Poland. For this reason, a person who has been randomly drawn cannot be replaced with anyone else. Any responses that you will provide will be treated as strictly confidential and will never be traceable to your name in any way.

The vast majority of people find participation in this survey to be an interesting and pleasant experience. An interviewer from our research centre will visit you between 7 October and 15 December and, if you agree to take part, the interviewer will ask you questions from the survey questionnaire.

You will find more details about the survey overleaf. However, should you wish to obtain any additional information or clarification, please contact us by phone (a reverse charge call), preferably from Monday to Wednesday. The telephone number to the Centre of Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences is (22) 826 96 17. You can also contact us via e-mail at orbs@ifispan.waw.pl. We will be happy to answer your questions.

You can also find information about the European Social Survey on the following website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>

Thank you very much for your consideration. We hope that you will be interested in participating in the survey.

Director
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Polish Academy of Sciences

Professor Henryk Domański

Manager
Centre of Sociological Research Institute of
Philosophy and Sociology
Polish Academy of Sciences

Associate Professor Paweł B. Sztabiński

IMPORTANT: If you are under 18 years of age, please show this letter to your parents.

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Given the considerable sample size, the letters contained scanned signatures.

The page overleaf contained additional information for recipients who would be more interested or more inquisitive (see below).

The second page began with information about countries participating in the project. Examples were selected to show that participating countries were located in various parts of Europe and were both EU member states and non-members.

The aim of point 2 was to demonstrate that Poland was represented in the committee which supervised the execution of the project and, as such, played an important role there. Moreover, the advance letter was signed by the person who represented Poland in that committee.

Point 3 contained information about the organisation conducting fieldwork for the survey. The aim was to encourage the sampled persons to take part in the survey. Earlier research showed that a considerable proportion of the sampled persons agree to take part in the survey because they want to help the interviewers in doing their job.

Information provided in point 4 was intended for two purposes. Firstly, the idea was to evoke positive emotions associated with Poland's participation in the ESS i.e. to communicate that Poland was among European leaders in the ESS. Secondly, the intention was to show how the survey results were utilised in Poland. Pilot studies had shown that a considerable proportion of the respondents believed that survey results were not used in any way or, in the best-case scenario, they did not know how such results could be used. Such beliefs certainly do not motivate people to take part in surveys.

Point 5 provided complete information on how the sampled persons' data were sourced and contained (alongside point 7) a direct reference to the Personal Data Protection Act which was in force in Poland. This was important because, as shown by earlier surveys, some citizens believe that the Act bans surveys or at least forbids access to personal data for survey-related purposes. The same point also contained information on how data would be protected and analysed.

Point 6 was designed to motivate the recipients to take part in the survey, describing the risk of errors resulting from non-response. Point 8 on voluntary participation was added to ensure compliance with the Polish Personal Data Protection Act and the ESOMAR Code. The letter came with an addressed and sealed postcard containing a declaration of ESS participation/refusal. It also included the identification number of the sampled person. Those who did not want to take part in the survey were asked to return the postcard by mail.

In ESS 1 and 2 the advance letters were mailed approximately one week before the start of the fieldwork period.

Information about the European Social Survey

1. The survey is conducted, among others, in the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom.
2. The survey is co-ordinated by an international research committee where Poland is represented by prof. dr hab. Henryk Domański.
3. In Poland, the survey is conducted by interviewers from the Centre of Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS), headed by doc. dr hab. Paweł Sztabiński. Interviewers from our centre conduct the survey as their job. For this reason, they strive to conduct the survey with all the sampled persons.
4. The first round of the survey was completed by Poland (in 2002) in keeping with all international standards and gained the utmost recognition among European sociologists. The results of the survey were presented at a scientific session organised on 22 January 2004 at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, in Warsaw. Participants of the session included researchers from Poland and other countries, representatives of central and local government, journalists, representatives of NGOs, opinion and market researchers and other individuals interested in comparing opinions and views held by European societies on matters which are crucial for the European continent. As an independent effort, in 2004 the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology will publish a book entitled 'Polish concerns' as a summary of the key findings from the survey.

The survey results are also available for any interested member of the public. They can be accessed via the Internet at <http://ess.nsd.uib.no>

The current round of the survey aims to explore the changes in societies' views and opinions on matters of key importance for Europe.

5. The current study covers a few thousand people throughout Poland. Their addresses were randomly drawn from the data kept by the Information Technology Development and Public Register System Department in Warsaw. Please note that random drawing of addresses for surveys such as this one is in compliance with the Personal Data Protection Act of 29 August 1997, as published in the Official Journal no. 133 item 883, and is known to, and approved by, the Inspector General for Personal Data protection (GIODO).
6. For survey findings to be accurate, it is crucial that all of the sampled persons agree to participate. If some of them refuse to take part, their views, obviously, will not be reflected. As a result, the survey findings will not accurately reflect the views of the society as a whole.
7. The survey is executed in full compliance with the requirements laid down in the Personal Data Protection Act. This means that answers given in the survey are treated as confidential. They will not be disclosed to anyone or published anywhere with names or any other details identifying our respondents. Responses given by survey participants will be processed only into collective statistical files. After the survey is completed, all addresses of the sampled persons will be deleted to prevent any use of those data for any other purposes.
8. Participation in this survey is voluntary. We have attached a card and a postage stamp to this letter.
 - If you AGREE to take part in the survey, please do not send us the attached card. You will return the card to the interviewer who will visit you.
 - If you DO NOT AGREE to take part in the survey, please detach the part of the card which reads: 'I DO NOT AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THE 'EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY',' affix the stamp and drop the card in a mailbox.

Thank you very much again for your interest. We do hope you will take part in the survey.

After completion of ESS 2 we approached the interviewers for comments that would help us improve the fieldwork efficiency and raise the response rate. As regards the advance letter, interviewers emphasised three points. Firstly, even if the letter does boost motivation to take part in the survey, the motivation dwindles over time (it is important to bear in mind that the fieldwork period in Poland took around two and a half months). Secondly, some sampled persons, especially from small towns, felt appreciated and motivated to take part in the survey by the sheer fact that they received a letter from Warsaw. They noticed the address of the survey sponsor and the postal stamp on the envelope. Thirdly, some sampled persons expressed concerns that a survey conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences which, additionally, focused on European topics (this was the perception) would be too difficult for them and would go beyond their knowledge and capability to express an opinion.

ADVANCE LETTER IN ESS ROUND 3

The comments shared by the interviewers after ESS 2 encouraged the Polish team to modify the advance letter. In order to address the problem of dwindling motivation, we decided to distribute two mailings. The first letter was sent from Warsaw about ten days before the start of fieldwork. The content did not differ significantly from the letters mailed in ESS 1 or 2. However, it contained an extra paragraph about the next mailing and the ESS website in the Polish language.

The first page of the first letter in ESS 3 is presented below (in English translation).

The content included overleaf was not much different, either. Some information was updated, especially concerning utilisation of ESS findings.

The first letter came with an insert containing distributions of responses to four questions in all countries participating in the ESS. In order to address the sampled persons' concerns we wanted to show that the ESS did not cover difficult topics which would be beyond their intellectual capabilities and did not require any special knowledge, notably on European affairs. Instead, the survey was presented as an opportunity to talk about interesting topics. The questions selected for the insert were taken from ESS 1 and 2. Two of them concerned everyday matters which would presumably be of interest for the sampled persons in the international context. One question concerned inter-racial marriages in the respondents' immediate family (ESS 1, QD35) and the other focused on opinions on the statement that 'most illnesses cure themselves without having to go to a doctor' (ESS 2, QD19). The other two questions were intended to provoke reflection. The idea was to avoid an impression that the ESS focused on simple, perhaps even trivial, matters and, as such, was not much different from some opinion surveys



Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences



Warsaw, 25 September 2006

Dear Sir,

You have been randomly drawn to participate in an international survey known as the *European Social Survey*. The survey aims to collect opinions from members of the public about a variety of topics that are important for Poland and Europe. This survey is being conducted for the third time now. The first edition was completed in 2002 and the second one in 2004. This edition will cover 30 countries across Europe, both members and non-member states of the European Union, incl. Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. The European Social Survey is designed to understand where people from different countries have similar views and opinions and where they differ in views. The survey in Poland is co-ordinated by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences.

The vast majority of people find participation in a survey of this kind to be an interesting and pleasant experience. The questionnaire will cover a variety of topics and no specialist knowledge or specific information is required to answer its questions. In order to give you a better idea of the issues covered in the questionnaire we have attached a summary of answers to a few questions asked in the European Social Survey in 2002 and 2004. These data were obtained in Poland and, for comparison, we have included data from other countries. We hope you will find the attached results interesting.

More details about the survey are given overleaf. **We will notify you about the approximate dates of the survey in our next letter.** Should you wish to obtain any additional information or clarification now, please contact us by phone (a reverse charge call, i.e. dial the toll-free number 9222 and ask to get connected with the phone number given below), preferably from Monday to Wednesday. The telephone number to the Centre of Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences is (22) 826 96 17. You can also contact us via e-mail at orbs@ifispan.waw.pl. We will be happy to answer your questions.

Information about the European Social Survey is also available on the following Internet sites: <http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/badania/ess/> (in Polish), and <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> (in English).

Thank you very much for your consideration. We hope that you will be interested in participating in the survey.

Director
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Polish Academy of Sciences

Professor Henryk Domański

National Project Co-ordinator
European Social Survey
Head of ORBS IFiS PAN

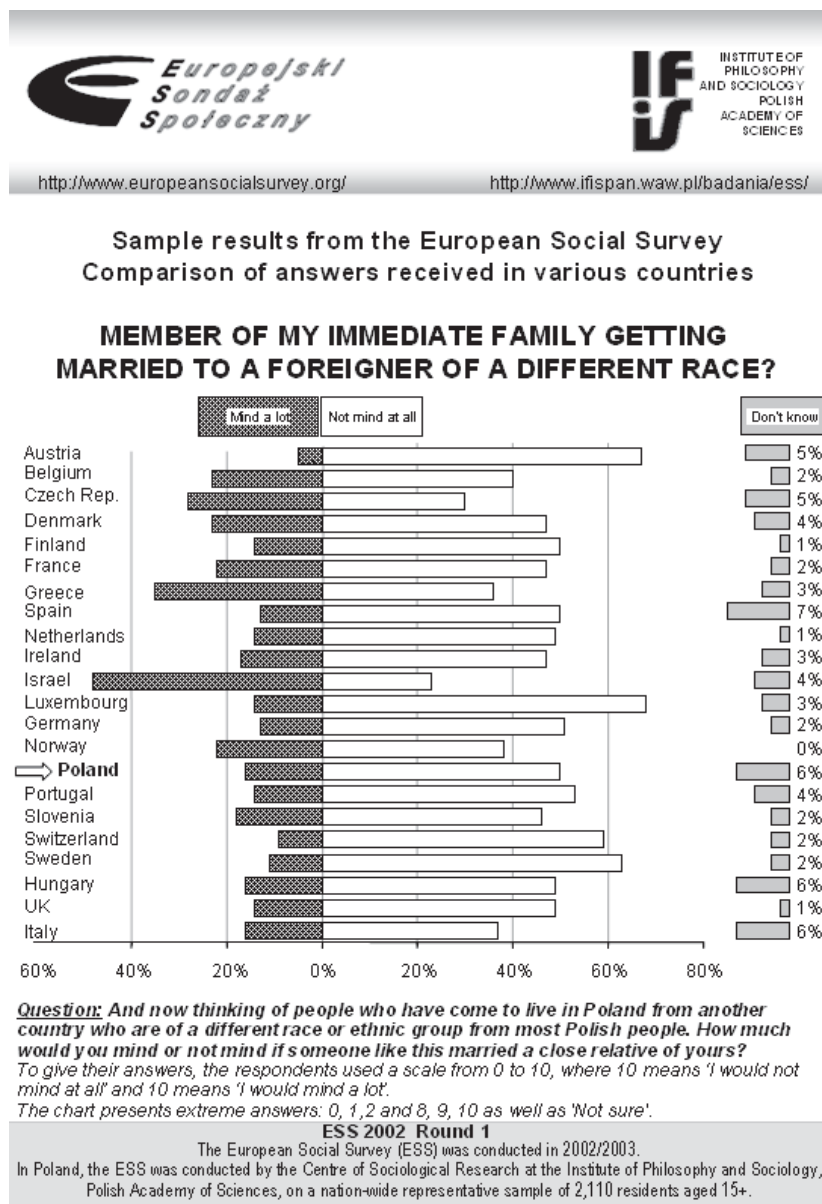
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published in glossy magazines. The first of those other two questions concerned opinions on the statements that the ‘Society would be better off if everyone just looked after themselves’ (ESS 2, QE2), whereas the last statement for evaluation was ‘If you want to make money, you can’t always act honestly’ (ESS 2, QE17).

The sample insert (in English translation) is given below



The second letter was intended to keep up the sampled persons' motivation to take part in the survey. It contained a gist of essential facts from the first letter and, additionally, the full name of the interviewer with the date of the call. Another aim was to make sure that the interviewer is not an anonymous person and, more generally, to reduce the insecurity associated with a stranger's call at someone's home. The second letter was mailed by the interviewer approximately ten days before the proposed call at the sampled person's home.

The first page of the second letter (in English translation) is given below.



Instytut Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences



Warsaw, 2 October 2006

Dear Madam,

Towards the end of September we sent you a letter with information that you had been randomly drawn, as one of over 2,000 people in Poland, to take part in an international study called *The European Social Survey*. As mentioned in the letter, this is one of the most important European surveys, aiming to gather societies' opinions on a variety of topics which are important for Poland and for Europe as a whole. The survey covers 30 countries, both members and non-members of the European Union. This year, the survey is being conducted for the third time.

On our interviewer, Mr/Ms will visit you and ask you to take part in the survey. We kindly ask you to accept this visit. For the survey results to be accurate, it is essential that all the sampled persons agree to take part in it. If some of the sampled persons refuse to take part, their views, obviously, will not be reflected. As a result, the survey findings will not reflect the views of the society as a whole. In the previous rounds of *The European Social Survey*, conducted in 2002 and 2004, the vast majority of the randomly selected persons showed understanding for its purposes and agreed to take part. As a result, Poland conducted the survey in accordance with all the international standards, gaining the utmost recognition among European sociologists. Only a handful of other countries can boast such a success: Estonia, Finland, Greece and Portugal. We sincerely hope that your participation, and participation of other persons sampled for the survey, will help Poland repeat the success and our country will again be among European leaders in the quality of social surveys.

You will find more details about the survey overleaf. However, if you wish to obtain any additional information or clarification, please contact us by phone (a reverse charge call, i.e. dial the toll-free number 9222 and ask to get connected with the phone number given below), preferably from Monday to Wednesday. The telephone number to the Centre of Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences is (22) 826 96 17. You can also contact us via e-mail at orbs@ifispan.waw.pl. We will be happy to answer your questions.

You can also find information about the European Social Survey on the following websites: <http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/badania/ess/> (in Polish) and <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> (in English).

Thank you very much for your consideration. We hope that you will be interested in participating in the survey.

Director
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Polish Academy of Sciences

Professor Henryk Domański

The National Co-ordinator
of the European Social Survey

Associate Professor Paweł B. Sztabiński

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Overleaf we provided information similar to that included on the second page of the first letter.

The letter came with a postcard containing a declaration of participation/non-participation in the ESS.

What did refusers remember from the advance letter in ESS 3?

The in-depth interviews conducted with hard refusers after ESS devoted ample time to the discussion on the advance letters. The idea was to check the role of advance letters (if any) in the participants' refusals. To explore this subject, we asked hard refusers what they remembered from the letters, how they reacted to the content of those letters and the insert, and we also attempted to reconstruct the connotations and reactions after the receipt of the letters.

We found that the majority of persons who participated in our QS (refusers) hardly recalled the fact of receiving advance letters. They did not remember whether or not they received the letters at all and how many letters they received. They confused advance letters with the mail questionnaire distributed as a follow-up survey. This may have been due to the time lapse (a few months) between the receipt of advance letters and the QS. However, considering the aforementioned findings by Link and Mokdad (2005), such responses may indicate that some sampled persons just ignored the letters.

Some QS participants mentioned a practice of sorting their mail. If a mailing is not enveloped, it is discarded immediately, without even being skimmed. This confirms the findings by Couper, Mathiowetz and Singer (1995) and by Hembroff et al. (2005). However, in the Polish ESS 3 the advance letter did draw attention. *'If it had been just a card, without an envelope, it wouldn't have been read at all'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired); *'that envelope looked, kind of, more distinct'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired). Therefore, it seems that the letter did reach the recipients and was not thrown away with advertising mail.

The QS participants had little to say about advance letters. As indicated earlier, the letters were printed on letterhead paper, with the name of the sponsor on the envelope, yet hardly any of the QS participants noticed the sponsor or identified it correctly (for instance: *'A development institute, I think, something to do with the European Union'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired); *'A professor needed it for some scientific study or something'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired). Some participants were not sure whether the sponsor's name was provided at all (*'it didn't say who was doing that /survey/, or did it? /.../ I didn't even wonder who was sending that to me'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, univ. degree, academic – during her university education this person attended lectures by professors from the Polish Academy of Sciences which she recalls as very interesting). Others

mentioned 'some institute' (9: M, 16 y.o., student) or claimed it did not matter who was conducting the survey (1: F, 36 y.o., married, basic vocat. educ., 3 children, housewife).

The ESS sponsor, Polish Academy of Sciences, enjoys very high prestige and public trust in Poland. This fact was confirmed by all QS participants when they were directly asked about it. However, this prestigious sponsor was not noticed by the vast majority of the QS participants. Only one participant remarked that a renowned research institution was the sponsor (yet he remembered the name incorrectly), which made him interested in the letter: *'Because it was the institute, I was curious what that could be'* (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working).

As far as the survey sponsor is concerned, it is important to emphasise that each participant received a total of 4 mailings on letterhead paper, with the sponsor's name printed on the envelope: two advance letters and 2 letters connected with the follow-up survey. The last mailing (thank you/remind letter) was sent approx. one month before the QS. Moreover, we contacted each participant repeatedly in connection with the QS, each time quoting the full name of the sponsoring institution. This means there were many occasions to notice the sponsor.

Likewise, the participants recalled very little from the content of the letter. While the majority remembered the title of the survey (more or less accurately) from the logo inserted in the letters, they openly admitted they could not remember what the survey was about (for instance: */it was/ 'a request to complete a questionnaire, but I'm taking a blind guess now'* 8: F, 28 y.o., married, univ. degree, academic). Some remembered a vague relationship to the European Union (for instance: *'a European survey... /.../ the idea was that the European Union is interested in it'* 1: F, 36 y.o., married, basic vocat. educ., 3 children, housewife), thought it was an international survey devoted to social issues (*/it was about a survey on / 'human relations, not just in our country but also in Europe, in the world'* 18: F, 73 y.o., univ. degree, retired) or reported connotations which were unrelated to the content of the letter (for instance: *'there was a letter written about... asking if people wanted to co-operate. A consent, something like that'* 20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired). One person also remembered what annoyed her about the letter, i.e. the information about random drawing: *'The first thing was about some random drawing... stupid. That's what I thought'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. degree, retired).

It is difficult to say whether or not the QS participants actually had read any of the advance letters, whether the first or the second one. Some claimed they had read the letter(s), others said they had only browsed through it (them) to get an idea what it was all about and yet others just read the beginning. Some accounts were inconsistent: the same participants first claimed they had read the advance letter but further on they admitted only browsing through it or vice versa. It is worth noting that very little, or nothing, drew their attention in the letter apart from the ESS logo.

Again, one might wonder how well the recipients would remember the content of the letters after a few months. However, it seems that if the advance letter had contained any important information, the recipients should have remembered it. After all, requests to participate in a survey are not received very often, at least not in Poland. Secondly, essential information about the ESS was repeated in the letter attached to the follow-up survey and in the thank you/ remind letter afterwards, so this information reached the participants four times. Thirdly, the coloured (red) ESS logo was placed on the gifts given to each sampled person, which should have aided recipients' memory.

Reactions to the advance letter in ESS 3

Three main types of reactions to advance letters can be identified. The first group of QS participants ignored the letter completely. They decided the matter was unimportant and not worth their while so they immediately forgot about it. Here are a few illustrative statements:

'I read it and decided it didn't matter; it wasn't important. Perhaps someone made a mistake and that wasn't important /.../ I just didn't think much about it, I threw it away, it didn't make sense to me, I didn't take it seriously. /.../ I put it in the kitchen drawer. I wanted to show it to my husband but I forgot about it /.../ I just ignored it, as simple as that. I didn't even read it carefully, I just threw it away' (1: F, 36 y.o., married, 3 children, basic vocat. educ., housewife); *'People are playing some games, don't know why... That's what I thought'* (18: F, 73 y.o., univ. degree, retired); *'I opened it, read it and thought: oh! just a questionnaire... /.../ I left it lying around'*. (26. M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working).

The second type of reaction involved apprehension and distrust. Such reaction was reported by elderly, poorly educated persons who had a sense of being marginalised. Elements of this reaction can be also observed in statements made by one young working participant. Apprehension and distrust were generated by the fact that an institution from Warsaw, one they did not know, had their full name and address and approached them about a thing that they did not find very clear. This experience made them suspect fraud and attempts to obtain money under false pretences, reminding them of door-to-door peddlers and direct marketing campaigns. They mentioned numerous examples of similar cases which they had heard of, or even had fallen victim to (or their friends/relatives had). One person said: *'Generally, it wasn't very annoying but I wondered why, where my name came from.'* Still, it did seem to be a problem for that person because it was reiterated during the interview (e.g. *'But where did it come from, my name, I mean? From some kind of a register.'*) Then the participant told the interviewer about numerous attempts various people made to contact him or his neighbours, by letter

or telephone, in order to offer something for sale, to borrow money etc. In some of those cases either letters were addressed personally to him or the caller knew his name: *'Last week I answered three phone calls myself. One was advertising some duvets. And they mentioned my last name, that's interesting.'* Such stories were repeated throughout the interview and the interviewee tried to make a point that one must be very careful in encounters with other people. *'A stranger will call, you know, they trick people into paying money, so it's not too... When I hear a voice that sounds wrong, I hang up and don't talk. /.../ They keep calling me, canvassing. They call people, send ads all the time.'* (20: M, 67 y.o., basic vocat. educ., retired).

Another retiree spoke in a similar tone, yet his sense of insecurity was less strong and his reaction was that of annoyance: *'Those surveys /i.e. advance letter/ are damaged by those mail order companies. They'd write 'You have won this or that....' That's what they are like. You need to make a payment or to call them and they're just about to send you the keys to your car. People get angry at this, they just dump those letters in the bin and that's it. /.../ How many times... /did they call me/... This and that, you've just won something. So I tell them, go ahead, keep it to yourself if I really won something. That kind of rubbish is done to trick you into calling them and paying the money. You have to pay for the phone call.'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired)

However, concerns about an unfamiliar institution having access to personal data are not limited to the elderly only. One of the youngest IDI participants (13. M, 17 y.o., student) described his reaction to the advance letter as follows: *'How come you know so much about me? My first and middle name, where I live, my postal address etc. I thought you were dangerous people, you know a lot about me. I felt, kind of, threatened'*. While the origin of this kind of reaction is not clear, one should note that it also coincides with social isolation. That person characterised himself in the following way: *'I lead a quiet life, really. I don't go to discos or anything /.../ I'm a loner type of guy, and I'm the only child my parents have.'*

Some sense of insecurity in connection with advance letters was mentioned also, as noted earlier, by another young man (26: M, 22 y.o., second. educ., working). While he ignored the letter completely (see above), his first reaction was that of alarm. He said this was because of his general distrustful attitude: *'I always assume that if someone approaches me, it's because they want to earn money from that.'* He then carried on by telling a story about a door-to-door salesman who persuaded his grandmother to buy something she did not need. As a result, that interviewee did read the advance letter at some point (most probably the second one, judging by his earlier statement): *'I just wanted to check and read what this was all about, to find out what it was and to check if this wasn't an attempt to trick me into paying money or something.'* What inspired his trust was the sponsor and, importantly,

absence of any gifts or any promise to hand in a gift: *'the letter/ reassured me that it wasn't /a fraud attempt /. There was no talk about any gifts or anything of that sort.'*

The third type of reaction can be described as directly expressed reluctance. However, based on the IDI participant's statement it is difficult to establish the reason for reluctance. She claims the letter failed to provide essential information (*'Negative, this was about that purpose, I didn't know what purpose it would serve and who was behind it' /The letter explained who conducted the survey and why/ 'And the letter? I just threw it away'*). This means that if she really wanted to get the information, she could have found it, and if it was not to her complete satisfaction, she could have written an e-mail or called the toll-free number. Having looked at the second letter (the one she could not recall earlier), the same person commented: *'If the interviewer enters a date here, they're imposing this date on me'* (8: F, 28 y.o., married, no children, univ. degree, academic). This illustrates her resistance to the situation when 'someone is trying to manage my time'. She interprets the situation as follows: a stranger wants to call at her home, expects a favour and, worse still, determines the date of that call.

Another thing worth mentioning in connection with advance letters is the attached return postcard. It gave the sampled persons an opportunity to express a refusal before the interviewer's visit. In fact, the QS participants either could not recall it at all, or could not remember returning it, or ignored it completely deciding it was not worth their attention.

Summary and conclusions concerning the advance letter in ESS 3

Participants of our qualitative study (refusers) did not throw the advance letter away with other advertising mailings. The fact that the letter came in an envelope played an important role. They did not read the letter but just checked whether it concerned anything that would be personally important/relevant to them. Nothing drew their attention apart from the ESS logo. They did not check what the letter was about and what they were asked to do. They were not interested in who had sent the letter to them. As they did not find anything relevant in the letter, they dealt with it as with other unsolicited mailings: threw it away or put it aside and forgot about it.

The only aspect that attracted attention of some participants, particularly elderly and socially isolated ones, was their personal data on the envelope: this was the only element of the letter that personally concerned them. However, this element made them apprehensive: an unfamiliar institution is approaching them about something that is quite unclear and, worse still, that institution has access to their personal data. These concerns were raised by the fact that advance letters arrive

in the context of annoying mass mailings, door-to-door selling, telemarketing and various fraud attempts. As a result, recipients link advance letters with such activities. Such connotations did not encourage participants to read the letter more carefully. Thus, they threw the letter away which was a defensive reaction. As follows from their other accounts, such persons did not admit having received the advance letter when talking to the interviewer (*'I didn't get anything, I don't know anything'*).

The concerns about an unknown institution having access to personal data are not necessarily a function of more mature age. This kind of reaction may be also displayed by young people who are somewhat isolated in social terms.

Another aspect of reluctance generated by advance letters is connected with intrusion into privacy or, more broadly, into self-centred life. Therefore, an advance letter is seen as an attempt by an unfamiliar institution to impose something: an interviewer's visit, in this case. The aforementioned QS female participant could remember nothing about the letter but she did recall her own negative reaction to it. Most probably, she suppressed the unpleasant fact (someone approached her about a matter which did not concern her directly).

Overall, it seems that advance letters are ignored by QS participants because they do not concern any aspects of reality that would be personally relevant or an aspect they would like to focus on. However, this is not connected with lack of interest in the topic of the survey. Opinion surveys have shown that support for EU membership among the Polish public has remained at about 70–80% for some time now (the topic of the ESS was associated with the EU by letter recipients).

Moreover, nobody but one QS participant made a critical comment about that topic. In most cases the problem does not even lie in general disregard for surveys. When recipients of advance letters realised that it did not concern a matter that was personally relevant to them, they lost interest and did not take the trouble to check its contents. Other participants who did check what the letter was about felt that the whole thing was unimportant for them. This kind of reaction was also found among open-minded people engaging in social activities. In any event, the final result is the same in each case: advance letters are not read, they are put aside or thrown away.

The second advance letter was viewed in very much the same way. The QS participants did not remember it at all because it contained no novel elements vis-à-vis the first one. Consequently, they dealt with it in the same way as they deal with marketing mailings, i.e. paid no attention to it. On the other hand, it does seem reasonable to send two advance letters. Even if the recipients completely ignore the first mailing, there is still a chance that they will become interested in the second one. As one of the respondents put it: *'When I got that questionnaire from you, I didn't pay any attention to it the first time around. I did pay some*

attention to the second or the third letter though'. (26. M, 22, second. educ., hired worker). Moreover, the fact that someone would send more than one letter about the same issue might create an impression that the issue is, indeed, an important one: *'If someone has shown persistence and hasn't been discouraged after the first no-reply from me, they proved that they really meant business. /.../ Don't rest on your laurels, just do it again, and call that person even for the third time.'* (18. F, 73 y.o., univ. degree, retired); *'You sent it twice so I thought: alright, I'll see what it is.'* (23. M, 61 y.o., retired, primary educ.). On the other hand, the second letter may have also caused irritation (*'they are bothering me again'*), which may have caused one participant's negative reaction to the second letter.

The logic of living a life focused on one's own world might well explain the anxiety caused by advance letters. For some of our QS participants, the fact that someone had access to their personal data was the only thing which they found relevant about the letter. Likewise, suspicions about fraud, scams and marketing tricks were a thing which concerned the recipients personally.

One might consider participating in a survey when there is nothing else to do at a particular moment. One comment about participation in the follow-up survey provides a good illustration: *'I dropped it /mail questionnaire/ in the mailbox out of boredom. It might or might not get there, might or might not reach them.'* (23: M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired). This quotation shows that the respondent completed the mail questionnaire for his personal benefit, i.e. to kill boredom, but he did not care what would happen to the questionnaire later.

On the other hand, these types of reactions to advance letters may, to some extent, be related to the size of the letter and the volume of information in it.

Yet another problem is posed by the presence of the expression *'you have been randomly drawn'*. This phrase cannot be easily replaced yet it turns out to be unfortunate. It makes the recipients think of marketing contests, attempted fraud and scams and, as such, either alarms them or, at best, causes them to disregard the letter. Such reactions may become more widespread and more common in future as Internet penetration increases. They may be driven by the spreading of e-mail fraud (messages about false 'great' lottery wins or requests for help in return for substantial financial rewards).

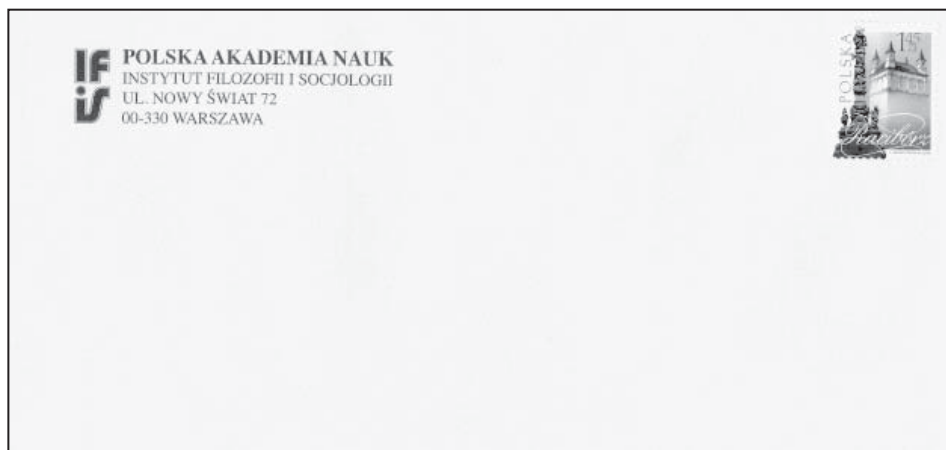
Our study suggests that some modifications are needed when preparing the advance letter in future. Firstly, since mail is sorted and some of it is thrown away without being read, the envelope must look different from advertising mailings. It must draw attention and encourage the recipient to inspect the content. In that function, the letter certainly may not be substituted with a postcard containing survey information. Secondly, emphasis needs to be put on the fact that the ESS is sponsored by the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS). Our research has shown that the Polish Academy of Sciences is an institution of authority for most of the

interviewed hard refusers. Thus, the highlighted name of the PAS on the envelope may stimulate interest in the letter. Thirdly, one should reduce the sense of insecurity originating from the fact that the survey organisation holds the sampled persons' personal data. It is important to remember that the sense of threat resulting from the survey organisation having access to personal data co-existed with the insecurity associated with an unfamiliar situation and suspicions of fraud: some participants stressed the former whereas others focused on the latter. This leads us to the fourth conclusion: the letter should clearly stress the purpose of the interviewer's call. The idea is to motivate the sampled persons to read the letter. The fifth conclusion is obvious but also most difficult to fulfil: the letter should encourage the sampled persons to take part in the survey.

The latter conclusion supports the idea to send two advance letters. As it turned out, this approach is reasonable not just because it keeps up the motivation to take part in the survey (which was difficult to establish from a study with hard refusers) but it also improves the chances that the sampled persons will become interested in the mailing and will start to believe that the issue they are approached about is, indeed, important.

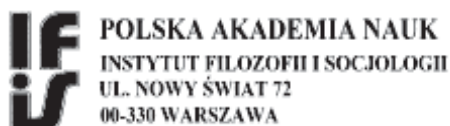
ADVANCE LETTER IN ESS ROUND 4

Tversky and Kahneman (1974) show that in the situation of uncertainty one of the heuristics employed in making judgements is representativeness: i.e. how much A is representative of B, or how much A resembles B. Since, as evidenced from our IDIs with hard refusers, an unknown mailing is interpreted as advertising, door-to-door selling or attempted fraud, the advance letter before ESS 4 was prepared with a view to avoid such connotations.



The envelope containing the advance letter was made of high quality paper in the ecru colour. The printing on the envelope strongly emphasised the name of the Polish Academy of Sciences (one that evokes positive connotations) rather than the name of its organisational unit, i.e. the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, as the latter is not very well known and may be hard to remember.

We also prepared special letterhead paper on which to print the letter. The letterhead was the same as the printed text on the envelope.



Dear Madam,

The Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, is conducting a study entitled *The European Social Survey*. This survey covers 30 European countries and aims to compare opinions of their residents on a variety of topics which are important for Poland and for Europe as a whole. This year, the survey is being conducted for the fourth time.

Each country has randomly drawn a few thousand people who make up a representative sample of its total population. In Poland, in order to build such a representation, we used the data kept by the Information Technology Development and Public Register System Department in Warsaw (PESEL).

In October or November our interviewer will visit you and ask you to take part in the survey. We will provide the full name of the interviewer and the suggested time of the visit in our next letter.

We kindly ask you to welcome the interviewer and agree to take part in our survey. For the vast majority of people this has been an interesting and pleasant experience. The survey questionnaire covers many different topics but no specialist knowledge or any particular information is needed to answer the questions. We just seek our society's opinions on various matters. **We have attached a few sample graphs with opinions held by Polish citizens in the context of opinions expressed by citizens of other European countries.**

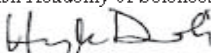
Detailed information about the European Social Survey is provided overleaf. You can also find more information on the following website:

http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/badania/europejski_sondaz_spoleczny/

If you wish to obtain any additional clarification, please contact us by phone (a reverse charge call, i.e. dial the toll-free number 9222 and ask to get connected with tel. (22)826 96 17. This is the telephone number to the Centre of Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences. You can also contact us via e-mail at: orbs@ifispan.waw.pl We will be happy to answer your questions.

Thank you very much for your consideration. We hope that you will be interested in participating in the survey.

Director
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Polish Academy of Sciences


Professor Henryk Domański

The National Co-ordinator
of the European Social Survey


Associate Professor Paweł B. Sztabiński

IMPORTANT: If you are under 18 years of age, please show this letter to your parents.

Considering that a long letter may discourage recipients from reading, the first letter was considerably shortened and its key elements were printed in bold type. This created an opportunity to grasp the recipient's attention and convey the information about the purpose of the interviewer's call.

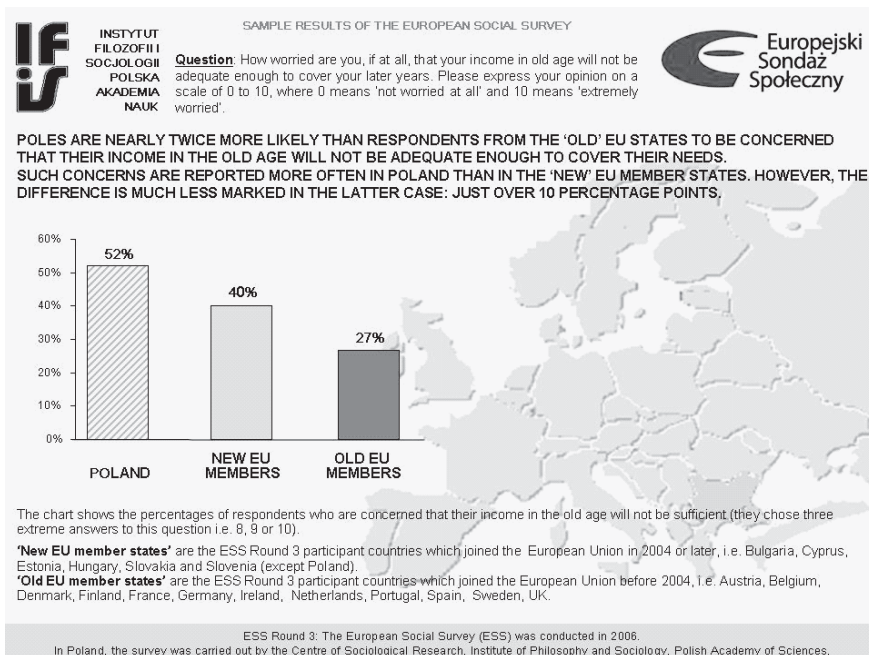
In order to reduce the sense of insecurity associated with availability of personal data, the information about the source of random drawing was provided at the very beginning of the letter in the hope of improving the chances for this information to be noticed by the recipients.

The second page of the letter remained without much change versus the previous rounds but, of course, the information about preceding rounds and the utilisation of findings was updated.

On the other hand, the inserts attached to the advance letter (containing distributions of responses to selected ESS questions from previous rounds) were modified considerably. The qualitative study after ESS 3 showed that none of its participants paid any attention to the inserts. Nevertheless, the ESS team decided that the inserts should be retained as they may potentially dispel doubts and concerns regarding the purpose of the interviewer's call. The fact that the inserts did not generate interest may have stemmed from the way they were prepared: they may have been discouraging for potential readers. The previous insert contained a lot of data and was based on the assumption that the recipients would be able to interpret the results by themselves. For this reason, the inserts in round 4 were shortened and contained only distributions of answers to two questions. The data were presented in a breakdown into 'old EU countries' and 'new member states' plus Poland. The questions related to people's concerns about income in the old age (QD53: How worried are you, if at all, that your income in old age will not be adequate enough to cover your later years?) and the frequency of contacts with friends, relatives and colleagues (QC2: How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?)

Additionally, the insert included interpretations of response distributions. We hoped that the more attractive graphic layout and interest in the presented results would boost the sampled persons' interest in the letter and in the survey.

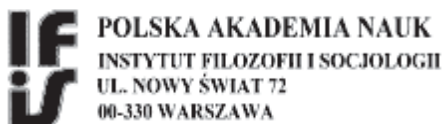
Sample insert used in ESS 4



The second letter was also short but it contained additional details of the interviewer: not only the full name but also the interviewer ID and telephone number. Those details were provided with a view to enhance the interviewers' credibility. In order to avoid an impression that we were imposing the date of the interviewer's call, we used the phrase 'suggested date of the interviewer's visit'.

What did refusers remember from the advance letter in ESS 4?

Nearly all participants of our qualitative study (hard refusers) remembered receiving an ESS-related mailing. Only one person, who did recall receiving a letter from the PAS, was not sure if it was connected with the ESS: *'I got a letter. Someone called me from the Polish Academy of Sciences. But I'm not sure if these things are connected. I got confused because I wasn't sure if it was a different thing, and whether it was about an interviewer calling at my place.'* (12. F, 40 y.o., post-secondary educ., accountant). Two other QS participants claimed they never received any letters, which seems likely because one of them recently moved to another address and the other one was registered for permanent residence in a place where he did not actually live. Due to the latter fact, some sampled persons



Warsaw, November 2008

Dear Madam,

At the end of October we sent you a letter with information that the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, was conducting a study entitled *The European Social Survey*. We also asked you to take part in that survey.

For the survey results to be accurate, it is essential that all the sampled persons take part in it. If some of them do not participate in the survey, the results which are published will not accurately reflect the views of the **entire** society. **For this reason we kindly ask you again to take part in the survey. However, participation is voluntary.**

As mentioned in our previous letter, we would like to provide you with some details about the interviewer who will come to visit you.

Suggested date of the interviewer's visit:

Full name of the interviewer:

Interviewer ID number at the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology:

Interviewer's telephone number:

(preferably call from to)

More details about *The European Social Survey* is provided overleaf. You can also find more information on the following website:

http://www.ifispan.waw.pl/badania/europejski_sondaz_spoleczny/

If you wish to obtain any additional clarification, please contact us by phone (a reverse charge call, i.e. dial the toll-free number 9222 and ask to get connected with tel. (22)826 96 17. This is the telephone number to the Centre of Sociological Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, the Polish Academy of Sciences. You can also contact us via e-mail at: orbs@ifispan.waw.pl We will be happy to answer your questions.

Thank you very much for your consideration. We hope that you will be interested in participating in the survey.

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received advance letters with delay, after the interviewer had already attempted to contact them.

Some of our QS respondents spontaneously commented on the envelope that was specially prepared for advance letters. One of them, however, felt it was a standard-looking envelope (*I got a letter from the Polish Academy of Sciences /.../*

An ordinary yellow envelope . ' (3. M, 25 y.o., secondary educ., health pensioner & housing administrator). However, the remaining respondents displayed positive reactions (*'It's probably because of that envelope that I didn't throw the letter away.* ' (5. F, 29, univ. degree, self-employed); *'In comparison with others /other surveys/, like the ones that get handed out, I will always take a look at something like this. It's not an advert.* ' (14. M, 36, secondary educ., printing house worker). The professional look of the envelope also drew attention of another participant in our QS, a business owner, who had not received the mailing but saw the materials during the in-depth interview (*'/the envelope/ Looks elegant. /Overall impression/ Good. It comes in a stylish envelope /.../.* ' (9. F, 33, univ. degree, business owner). Worth noting are the occupations of those individuals who commented positively on the appearance of the envelope: business owners and a person who works at a printing house are in a position to appreciate the design of the envelope.

Only some QS participants remembered receiving two letters but they did not make any comments on that fact. Only one participant said: *'Well, it certainly means that someone is trying hard to contact me. That's a plus.* ' (10. M, 25, secondary educ., blue collar worker). This seems to indicate that the respondents feel good about a research institution really wanting them to take part in the survey.

What nearly all QS participants remembered was the survey sponsor, i.e. the Polish Academy of Sciences. Only one person said *'The letter came from the University in Warsaw* ' (4. M, 18, secondary educ., student), which, in fact, is also an academic/research institution.

Many comments indicate that it was the printing on the envelope, highlighting the name of the PAS, that played a crucial role for the identification of the survey sponsor: *'I knew it /was PAS / – that name was on the stamp.* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher); *'It /the envelope/ read PAS.* ' (8. M, 25, univ. degree, foreman). Presumably, when receiving a mailing, the recipients mostly look at the envelope to check the sender. It seems, therefore, that it is not only the design of the envelope but also the printed information with the name of the sponsor that may play a crucial role for deciding on whether to read the content of the mailing or throw it away without opening.

However, nobody in the QS remembered the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology (a unit within the Polish Academy of Sciences) as the actual sponsor of the ESS. This shows that QS participants were satisfied with partial information about the sponsor.

As regards the content of the letters, only some participants (about a half of them) had anything to say about it, if we disregard the information about the Polish Academy of Sciences as the institution which was conducting the survey. *'Polish Academy of Sciences, a sociological study, I was selected, they want to do interviews with people of varied levels of education: primary, vocational,*

university degrees, and they can't do without me because otherwise that study wouldn't make sense and my opinion is really important. The interviewer's name and phone number were given. 'The same respondent could not remember the topic of the study and, besides, she did not explore the subject: *'That was stated in the letter, I suppose, but I can't remember what the survey was supposed to be about. I didn't read that far.'* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher); *'First, there was the letter which said that I had been selected as one of 5,000 people, using my personal ID, to hold a survey about living in Europe or something.'* (2. M, 37, secondary educ., business owner); *'I got a letter from the Polish Academy of Sciences telling me that an interviewer would call at my place. And if I don't agree, I'm supposed to send them a postcard, stamped. I knew it was a survey but I didn't know the topic. I read that an interviewer was going to come round. And he was supposed to call me beforehand. I can't remember much. I was selected with a group of people, for a social survey, and said they'd appreciate if I agreed to take part. The survey was supposed to be about social affairs.'* (3. M, 25, secondary educ., health pensioner & housing administrator); *'At first there came a letter, I think, about that survey. I can't remember the details, really but I had been notified in some way that people would be calling, or coming.'* (7. M, 42, secondary educ., transport worker); *'All the first letter contained was some information. The second one came with a postcard which I could send back in case I didn't agree to take part. The second letter had details of the person who was supposed to do the survey.'* (8. M, 25, univ. degree, foreman); *'First I got a letter. Two weeks later I got another one. I was asked to reply but it didn't work for me. I read it quickly and decided it wasn't important.'* (10. M, 25, secondary educ., blue collar worker). However, the same respondent could not remember the content of the letters at all and did not recognise them during the in-depth interview: *'/The survey/ was about membership in the European Union.'* (12. F, 40, post-second. educ., accountant); *'That letter was about telling you that there was going to be a survey so I was surprised. /.../ I can't even remember the content /of the letter/.'* (13. F, 38, secondary educ., retail worker); *'A letter came saying that on a particular day, at a particular time someone was going to come and do a survey with me. They gave a phone number. /.../ I read the letter up unto a point where it said it was a survey. I knew what it was all about.'* (15. M, age: refused., secondary educ., secret services).

While the QS participants remembered the content of the letters very poorly, and they recalled various elements from them, yet the essential goal of the letter, i.e. to deliver information about a survey being conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences, was achieved. Secondly, most of the QS participants remembered that the letter mentioned a forthcoming interviewer visit and some even remembered that it provided essential details about the interviewer. Each of those issues is important. When asked how they would like the contact with the interviewer to be

organised, QS participants stressed that they wanted to be notified beforehand that someone would call at their place. Therefore, the condition they put forward was actually met. Providing interviewer details was important given that some of the participants mentioned security concerns. Thirdly, excerpts from the letter actually recalled by the QS participants were generally in line with the content of the letter i.e. the message reported was not distorted.

One other reaction also seems important: one participant was initially unable to make sense of the mailing. *'Something bizarre came with my mail. Not an advert. And it said Polish Academy of Sciences, well, whatever do they want from me?!'* That respondent claimed he had not read the letter (*'Someone wrote something but I don't feel like reading it'*) but he knew that the correspondence was about *'some survey studies'*, academic studies which concerned *'moods, or something'* (14. M, 36, secondary educ., printing house worker). Therefore, the respondent just looked at the letter to see what that *'strange mailing'* was about. Other QS participants could hardly remember anything from the letter, except for the sponsor (PAS).

It is difficult to know unambiguously how many of the QS participants actually read the advance letter. Some of them said they had read it (*'When I get stuff, I read it.'* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher) and they remembered its content quite well. However, when asked about details, they admitted not reading the whole letter (*'It may have been printed overleaf but I didn't read that thing.'* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher). Other participants claimed they had read the letter but could not remember anything from it. On the other hand, those who said they did not read the letter, did mention some details contained in it. Therefore, it seems that at least a proportion of the participants did not read the letter carefully but skimmed through it to check its subject. As will be discussed further, the letter concerned a matter which they found trivial. Therefore, they did not remember their own behaviour or the content of the letter. This conclusion largely confirms the hypothesis put forward by Groves and Couper (1998) who argued that people who receive a mailing from an unknown institution do not read it carefully but just check its subject. Once they decide that the matter is trivial, they lose interest and do not read the mailing thoroughly.

When discussing the message remembered from advance letters, it is important to mention the insert attached to the first mailing, with distributions of responses to two ESS 3 questions. Nobody from the QS participants recalled the insert. This shows that once they recognised the subject-matter of the mailing and decided it was trivial, they lost interest in the content. Similar reactions were also observed during the in-depth interviews when the participants were exposed to the actual advance letters. Only one person (who, by the way, did not receive any of the letters), said that the attached results were interesting and she rated the mailing

positively overall: *'This is /.../ nicely described. Great, really a great idea.'* (9. F, 33, univ. degree, business owner).

It seems that nobody but one person took any interest in the consent/refusal postcard. Even if they did, they nevertheless considered the survey to be too insignificant to take their time: *'I wanted to send it to say that I don't wish anyone to come to my place. I didn't, eventually, 'cause I was busy with other things.'* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher).

Reactions to the advance letter in ESS 4

While the IDI participants after ESS 4 (hard refusers) could remember much more from advance letters in comparison with similar participants after ESS 3, their reactions were not much different. The first type of reaction was to ignore the letter completely. After a cursory glance, they put the letter aside and either forgot about it or just threw it away. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the letter played no role in their decision to participate (or not) in the ESS. Here are some typical statements illustrating this kind of reaction: *'I read it and threw it away. I didn't find it interesting. Then another letter came. I didn't reply. I read that she /interviewer/ was going to come but I attached no importance to the date.'* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher); *'After receiving the letter/ I thought, I'm not interested.'* When asked whether there was anything in the letter that he found interesting, he replied: *'None, since I didn't take the survey.'* (2. M, 37, secondary educ., business owner). Another participant could not remember what he did with the letter but it played no role in his decision: *'.../ The envelope and the wording didn't make any difference . '* (4. M, 18, secondary educ., student). And here are some examples of reactions: *'A letter came, I forgot about that thing a bit. I usually dump these things in the bin.'* (5. F, 29, univ. degree, self-employed); *'There were some letters, now a survey came but it's lying around somewhere.'* (7. M, 42, secondary educ., transport worker); *'I read it /the letter/ quickly and decided it wasn't important. It failed to make me interested.'* (10. M, 25, secondary educ., blue collar worker); *'The letter was/ Sitting there all the time... /when asked why she ultimately took no part in the survey/:* *'I just put the letter in the drawer and forgot about it 'cause it didn't require too much time /.../ I put it in the drawer, shut it, and that was the end of the story.'* (12. F, 40, post-second. educ., accountant); *'My view of the letter was/ Quite positive, you know, a university doing research. /I didn't read the letter because/ Somebody wrote something, and I didn't feel like reading it.'* When asked if he found the subject-matter interesting, he replied: *'No. After all, it's just some kind of a survey.'* (14. M, 36, secondary educ., printing house worker). One participant who read the letter up to a point where it mentioned a survey reported his reaction as follows: *'It doesn't appeal to me. I'm not interested in surveys.'*

When asked what he thinks an advance letter should look like, he did provide a response but quickly added that even such a letter would not convince him to take part (15. M, age: refused, secondary educ., secret services).

The reaction displayed by yet another participant was quite similar: she cursorily read the letter and decided it was close to advertising. *'I thought it would be something like an advert. I paid no attention to it whatsoever /.../ I skimmed through it but I get lots of other ads anyway, they say I've won stuff etc., so I kept it lying around./.../ I put that /the letter/ aside. /.../ I thought it was one of those many ads.'* (13. F, 38, secondary educ., retail worker).

Another type of reaction to the advance letter was interest. This reaction, however, was reported only by two IDI participants. The first one became interested in taking part but not because of the subject-matter of the survey but because of the interviewer: *'I was curious, especially about the kind of interviewer I was going to get.'* (3. M, 25, secondary educ., health pensioner & housing administrator). After receiving the advance letter, he was definitely ready to take part in the survey. One important aspect was that the survey was not (in his perception) about politics, which he did not want to discuss. The second participant said: *'After getting the letter/ I didn't have a negative attitude. I didn't know if I was going to take part but I thought so. As the survey was being done by the Polish Academy of Sciences, I expected interesting topics which I would be happy to speak about.'* Moreover, he directly said he felt distinguished by having been randomly selected for the survey: *'That was nice, I got drawn for the survey.'* (8. M, 25, univ. degree, foreman).

Another type of reaction after receiving the letter was a sense of threat: *'I wondered where they got my data from and why they were writing to me. I decided I wasn't anonymous 'cause they knew everything about me and sent me all kinds of questionnaires. /.../ That made me feel negative about the whole thing, like, where they got my data and my address from.'* This statement indicates an overall sense of threat to personal security. Referring to the interviewer's potential call at her home, the same woman said: *'I never let interviewers in. We live in a country which is full of aggression and burglaries, no trust in other people. I don't know who the interviewer is. /.../ I don't know why they come round, perhaps to murder me or rob me. When I was coming to this place /i.e. the research lab where the in-depth interview was held/ I took my husband along.'* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher). Another participant displayed a similar reaction: *'I was wondering where they got my address from and what they wanted from me.'* In his view, surveys were equal to *'spying on people'*. When asked about anonymity of surveys, he replied: *'They certainly are not /anonymous/.'* (15. M, age: refused, secondary educ., secret services). Notably, the sense of threat generated by the receipt of an addressed, personalised letter co-exists with a dismissive attitude towards the survey. This might be a defensive reaction which people are not fully aware of:

they decide that the survey is unimportant and play it down to reduce uncertainty. However, one must add that both those individuals agreed to come to an interview in a research lab, perhaps because they wanted to see 'who the ESS sponsor really was'.

When discussing reactions to the advance letter, it is worth quoting one QS participant who did not receive the advance mailings. During the in-depth interview she expressed the following opinion: *'This is a very good idea. I regret that the /post/man did not leave it at my door or didn't stick it in my door. That would've been an idea. Everything looks fine, really nice. If this thing happened right at the very beginning, I would've probably met her /the interviewer/.'* (9. F, 33, univ. degree, business owner). Therefore, in this case, professional preparation of materials would have played a decisive role for her decision to participate in the survey.

When discussing reactions to the advance letter, one should also mention the ones that concerned the survey sponsor. As mentioned earlier, nearly all participants of the in-depth interviews could remember that it was the Polish Academy of Sciences. Reactions to that fact varied. The first type of reaction could be described as indifference: *'I attach no importance to that /the letter coming from the PAS/. I know the name /of the PAS/ but I don't know what they do.'* (1. F, 25, univ. degree, teacher). When asked whether it was important that the survey was being conducted by the PAS, another participant replied: *'No, it wasn't. It makes no difference to me.'* (12. F, 40, post-second. educ., accountant). And here are some other comments from other participants, all in the same spirit: *'Academy of Sciences was an abstract idea for me. I just gave it a shrug.'* (13. F, 38, secondary educ., retail worker); *'And it said /on the envelope/ The Polish Academy of Sciences, whatever could they want from me? I wasn't interested.'* (14. M, 36, secondary educ., printing house worker); *'What can an institution such as the PAS want from an ordinary person?'* (15. M, age: refused, secondary educ., secret services). However, this doubt was expressed in the context of beliefs that results of academic research are not available for people such as the respondent, which was thought to mean that such people have nothing in common with the PAS.

The second type of reaction to the name of the Polish Academy of Sciences was to realise that the letter came from an important and prestigious institution, sometimes contrasted with market research institutes. *'To me, the Polish Academy of Sciences is a serious institution. /.../ it is a prestigious institution and one can go ahead and do such studies with them. Private companies which come to see me about frozen foods are ridiculous – they only do it for themselves.'* (3. M, 25, secondary educ., health pensioner & housing administrator). For another participant, the prestige of the PAS was not related to the nature of its activity but

it originated from the fact that the PAS has access to official data and EU finding, which he thought were used to finance the survey. *'Since you know my personal identification number, it means you have some access to data and you are a serious institution. Not everyone can get access to personal IDs, even though you might try and guess it at random. You are pretty much an institution that has my trust. /.../ They look like a serious institution. If the EU has given them the money, it must be a serious organisation. They do some serious business there.'* However, the same person also added: *'It didn't really play much role' /for his decision on participation in the ESS/.* (2. M, 37, secondary educ., business owner).

However, for some participants the information about the PAS being a sponsor did play an important role and predisposed them favourably towards the ESS, although it is difficult to pin down the source of those positive connotations: *'The Polish Academy of Sciences did it, I read. That's why I had nothing against it.'* (5. F, 29, univ. degree, self-employed); *'The survey was being conducted by/ the Polish Academy of Sciences, as far as I can remember. Which was a good thing, overall.'* (7. M, 42, secondary educ., transport worker).

Another type of reaction to the information about the PAS as a sponsor was that the respondents were interested in the survey and some of them felt the name of the PAS guaranteed that the study focused on important matters: *'It /the envelope/ said the Polish Academy of Sciences. /.../ I found that interesting. I had been drawn for a survey. I expected interesting topics that I'd be glad to speak about.'* (8. M, 25, univ. degree, foreman). Presumably, the participants believed that a survey conducted by the PAS cannot be about trivial matters. Other participants made comments in the same spirit: *'PAS sounds convincing to me. I know I would make my own contribution to that research. This is a highly renowned institution.'* (10. M, 25, secondary educ., blue collar worker); *'I decided that the PAS was a credible institution. This made the interviewer and the process more credible as well. It is important that the thing was of academic significance. /.../ I remembered it was the PAS and that's why it was important. However, I didn't really dig deeper into it.'* (11. F, 35, univ. degree, owner of three businesses). In the last two cases the participants probably referred to the sense of participating in a serious undertaking guaranteed by the fact that the survey was conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Summary and conclusions concerning the advance letter in ESS 4

1. Some of the sampled persons (those not living at their registered address) never received the letter or received it with considerable delay. This may have affected their first reaction to the interviewer's call as they had not been notified of it. Meanwhile, prior notification is stressed by the QS participants as a very

important factor driving participation. One of the participants directly said that if she had received the mailings (which she had not), she would have taken part in the ESS. In this case, however (9. F, 33, univ. degree, business owner), the professional design of the mailings also played a very important part (i.e. the envelope, content of the letter, and the attached insert).

2. The vast majority of the QS participants did recall receiving one or more letters about the survey. While only a handful mentioned the special envelope, this element may have nevertheless aided their memory (alongside the printed name of the Polish Academy of Sciences) and encouraged them to take a glance at the content, however cursory. The fact that the participants did remember receiving the mailings (much better than those interviewed in a QS after ESS 3) may also stem from the characteristics of the interviewed group: the participants were fairly young and working rather than mostly elderly people or old-age pensioners (as was the case in the preceding qualitative study). However, only some participants in the most recent study remembered receiving two letters. This probably results from the fact that they attached little importance to them.

3. The information that the survey was being conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences was recalled by nearly all the QS participants, which proves that emphasising the name of this sponsor on the envelope was the right decision. However, the Polish Academy of Sciences may provoke a variety of different reactions such as indifference, a sense of importance (yet the importance does not necessarily stem from the scholarly status of the PAS) or the belief that such an institution must conduct research on important issues. Therefore, the situation is different from that in the United States where studies carried out by governmental agencies are generally viewed favourably and given a high rank (Groves and Couper 1998). However, the fact that the QS participants did remember the name of the PAS may also be linked with the particular characteristics of the interviewed group of subjects.

Importantly, the participants who could remember the sponsor of the survey very well (PAS), did not recall the name of the ESS at all (*'I have no idea what kind of institution that is.'* (2. M, 37, secondary educ., business owner). Only one participant remembered it: *'I remember it was the European Social Survey. Not a nationwide survey in Poland but a European one.'* This, however, did not evoke positive reactions: *'I'd rather Poles have a say /.../ I prefer topics which are closer to Poland and relevant for us.'* (10. M, 25, secondary educ., blue collar worker). In this connection, it is worth mentioning that exactly the opposite statements were made after ESS 3: the respondents could primarily recall the European dimension of the survey, without remembering its sponsor.

In order to interpret this phenomenon, we may refer to heuristics employed in making judgements under uncertainty, as described by Tversky and Kahneman

(1974). Apart from representativeness, the case in point may also lie in availability, i.e. ‘the ease with which instances or occurrences can be brought in mind’ (p. 1127). In those instances, retrievability is affected not only by familiarity but also by salience and the effectiveness of search set.

In the ESS 3 the sponsor of the survey was described as ‘the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology’ (in the first line, followed by the Polish Academy of Sciences), which is not a very well known institution and, as such, might have been difficult to connect with anything. Consequently, the recipient of the advance letter used the name ‘European Social Survey’ as a clue to label an unknown mailing, easily associating it with the European Union or Europe. In contrast, in ESS 4 the respondents used the name of the sponsor (Polish Academy of Sciences), highlighted on the envelope and in the letterhead, as a clue for their labelling process. Presumably, in this case it was easier to label an unknown mailing by using the name of a well-known institution, which additionally evoked positive connotations (saliency). This interpretation is confirmed by a comment made by one QS participant: *‘I got it fixed in my memory that it was the Polish Academy of Sciences, and, as such, an important thing. But I didn’t explore it any further.’* (11. F, 35, univ. degree, owner of three businesses). This additionally shows that when making a judgement, the sampled persons use just one piece of information and it must be relatively easy to associate with something familiar. That piece of information presumably serves as a kind of mental label which is ascribed to the mailing in order to store it in memory.

4. Overall, the respondents could not remember the content of the letter very well. This is because they did not read it carefully but only checked what it was about, and also because surveys are a matter of little importance for them. However, one may assume that in most cases the letter fulfilled its main purpose: notifying the recipients of a survey conducted by the PAS and of the interviewer’s visit. As one of the participants put it: *‘The conversation is important, too, but in the case of PAS I had been notified by letter earlier, it was a good idea.’* (8. M, 25, univ. degree, foreman). The letter also gave the respondents an idea of the topics covered in the survey, or at least topics that are not covered, i.e. it reassured them that ESS was not an opinion poll on current politics (this would discourage some potential participants from taking part).

5. The most common reaction to the advance letter, as displayed by hard refusers, was to dismiss it. After a cursory glance, they put it aside or threw it away and forgot about it. The second type of reaction was a sense of threat connected with the fact that ‘someone has my personal data’ (full name and address). This may be a token of a general sense of insecurity or the belief that research is a kind of spying on people. Three issues should be stressed in this connection. Firstly, the sense of threat may be associated with a dismissive attitude towards surveys.

However, this might be related to a psychological mechanism aimed at reducing anxiety (the recipients feel threatened but the danger is not imminent). Secondly, the sense of threat, which was manifested mostly by elderly people (retirees) in the previous study, was now reported also by young people. This shows that the threat associated with participation in surveys does not have to be related to old age or social isolation. Thirdly, the information placed at the very beginning of the advance letter in the most recent ESS round explaining the source of personal data did not reduce the sense of insecurity for those participants. Perhaps they did not read the part of the letter where this was explained or perhaps the explanations provided were insufficient.

Another type of reaction to the advance letter, demonstrated by only two participants in our study, can be described as ‘being interested’, either in the subject-matter of the survey or in the interviewer as a person.

And, finally, the last type of reaction could be described as positive perception of a professionally looking letter. However, this reaction was observed only for a few categories of sampled persons (nevertheless, those categories are important given their propensity to fall into the non-response group).

6. This study confirmed our finding from previous qualitative research i.e. that sending two advance letters is reasonable. As one participant put it: *‘The first letter/ didn’t make me interested. Yet I read the second one. I have it at home. I read it carefully to find out what that thing was all about, and this convinced me a bit.’* (10. M, 25, secondary educ., blue collar worker)

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The in-depth interviews with hard refusers in Poland indicate that researcher’s rationality does not overlap with refusers’ rationality (researchers assumed that the sampled persons should be provided with exhaustive information about the survey to enable them to decide about survey participation). Researchers’ rationality is based on the assumption that the sampled persons will read the advance letter and consider arguments for and against participation. However, surveys are too unimportant for many sampled persons to consider participation or to even read the advance letter relatively carefully. As a result, the impact of the letter on the sampled persons’ decisions and on the door-step interaction is limited. Does that mean that there is little sense in distributing advance letters, especially in the light of aforementioned U.S. studies which report declining effectiveness of such letters? This question should be answered by each researcher individually, bearing in mind the considerable costs involved in preparation and distribution of advance letters. It seems that such answers may be aided by the results of research discussed here: they indicate what an advance letter can realistically achieve and

what is difficult or even impossible to attain. However, if researchers do decide to distribute advance letters, they should make sure to prepare such letters properly. Some problems related to this effort were illustrated in the discussion of advance letters distributed before subsequent ESS rounds in Poland, and of mistakes made in those cases.

What did advance letters achieve in the light of our research?

Firstly, the advance letters were not thrown away without being opened together with other unsolicited mail, especially advertising materials (junk mail). Research has shown that it makes no sense to mail postcards with information about the survey because they are likely to be thrown away without even a cursory glance at their content. A mailing must arrive in a quality envelope that attracts attention.

Secondly, the sampled persons did get the message about a survey being conducted and an interviewer planning to call at their door. Most participants of in-depth interviews stressed that they wanted to be notified about such a call. Of course, this information might help the sampled persons to be prepared better for a refusal (a fact that was also signalled by our interviewers). However, a letter gives the sampled persons an opportunity to take the trouble and read the letter and then think what they should say to the interviewer. Our research has shown that many people (at least hard refusers) consider surveys to be so unimportant that they do not want to spend time wondering about participation, not to mention any effort to devise ‘a strategy’ to talk to the interviewer. Moreover, this claim is not confirmed in answers from hard refusers who talked about reasons for refusal and the flow of door-step interaction with the interviewer (Sztabiński et al. 2008). Nevertheless, in view of the general social norms, an unexpected visit by a stranger who comes with an aim that is not entirely clear for the sampled person would certainly be inappropriate.

Thirdly, the letters enabled us to convey information about the title of the survey (in ESS 3) or about its sponsor (in ESS 4). It seems that unknown mailings must be ‘identified’ in some way through reference to something that is already known and easy to retrieve from memory, and creates a context for the mailing to be remembered. One may presume that mailings receive a kind of ‘mental label’ such as ‘a letter from the Polish Academy of Sciences’ or ‘a letter about a European survey’. Our study suggests that such labels may derive from the name of the sponsor or the title of the survey, as the case may be, as long as it is adequately highlighted. The mental label which determines the perception of a mailing and, thus, of a survey, may play an important role for decisions about participation or non-participation. Research findings indicate that respondents’ connotations and, thus, their mental labelling processes, may be influenced, to some extent, if the survey title or sponsor name is highlighted in the mailing. In particular, printing on the envelope and the letterhead of the letter play a role here.

However, the experience of ESS 5, which is discussed below, shows that the situation of uncertainty triggered by an unknown mailing may lead to fairly unexpected impressions, formed also on the basis of other information. While in the ESS 5 the design of the envelope and the letterhead were comparable to those in ESS 4, some sampled persons who called us about the survey nevertheless talked about the 'survey which asks about the sense of security'. By saying that they were referring to the insert in the ESS 5 advance letter which showed distributions of responses to the question about this subject. This shows which element of the advance letter was used by some recipients to identify/label the mailing. This falls within the aforementioned heuristics of availability, employed in making judgments under uncertainty. A call by a stranger (interviewer) may trigger a stronger or weaker sense of insecurity and the content of the question in the insert prompted this very line of thinking. The impact on the recipients' connotations generated by the advance letter calls for further research.

Fourthly, it seems that the advance letter allowed to reduce (but not entirely eliminate) the sense of insecurity arising from the fact that an unknown institution had the sampled persons' personal data. While such reactions were also reported in connection with the letter mailed before ESS 4 (where the information about the sampling frame used was placed at the very beginning for better impact), yet only two QS participants reported it. One was a secret services officer, which means that the overall suspiciousness and distrust may have originated from the nature of his job.

What was not achieved by advance letters in the light of our research?

The findings from our in-depth interviews suggest that the letters failed to encourage hard refusers to read the content of the mailing carefully. Those who claimed they had read the advance letter could not remember much from it, whereas others directly admitted that they did not familiarise themselves with the information overleaf or that they read it only up to the point which mentioned participation in the survey. Respondents' statements indicate that the length of the letter does not make an important difference. Also, nobody took notice of the insert which was intended to make recipients interested in the results of the ESS and drive participation, or at least encourage the recipients to read the details provided in the letter. This is hardly surprising given that surveys are played down by hard refusers and considered to be an issue of little importance. Therefore, a mailing which concerns surveys does not deserve their time or attention.

Overall, the advance letter has relatively little importance for driving participation. In the vast majority of cases it does not change the negative and/or dismissive attitude towards surveys in general, nor it is able to drive participation in a specific survey among those who, for a variety of reasons, do not want to

take part. The findings from the qualitative study after ESS 4 show that the letter successfully fulfilled its role only for two participants. However, one person was interested mostly because of the reputation of the survey sponsor (PAS) whereas the other was impressed by the professionally prepared materials.

DISCUSSION

Much like the introductory speech before the interview, an advance letter is intended to play two roles: informative and persuasive (Sztabiński 2005). The purpose is to provide essential details about the survey, such as the sponsor, topics covered, sampling frame etc. and, on the other hand, to drive participation. This distinction is only of analytical significance as some details (e.g. survey sponsor) might play not only an informative role but also encourage the sampled persons to take part, thus playing a persuasive role as well.

As the discussion in this paper has shown, advance letters fulfil the basic informative role but perform very poorly as persuasive tools. However, to achieve even this effect, it makes sense to send two advance letters. On the one hand, this fact indicates that the matter is important and, on the other, the sampled person may feel appreciated by the fact that someone really tries to contact him/her. Naturally, this does not mean that the letter will be read fully and attentively.

Can the persuasive function of advance letters be enhanced? It seems that research conducted by Ingwer Borg (2006) opens some perspectives in this regard. His findings suggest that a dismissive attitude towards surveys may result from the belief that survey results are obvious. While Borg conducted his research among managers, this belief seems to be held also by other categories of the public. QS participants interviewed after ESS 3 and ESS 4 also expressed such beliefs, as illustrated in these sample comments: *'Why should anyone spend money on surveys? Just to find out how rarely friends meet, or what? In my opinion, those kinds of surveys are not needed. In this one, Poles are afraid they won't have enough money for their old age. Well, as it happens, I know it, too'* (2. M, 37 y.o., secondary educ., business owner); *'It makes no sense to run surveys/ After all, everyone knows what the situation in this country looks like'* (23. M, 61 y.o., primary educ., retired); *'It's clear what kinds of answers people will give /in surveys/. I have a low salary, I'm repaying a loan, I have no money to repay, the business has collapsed and I'm soon going to be out of my job etc.'* (9. F, 33, univ. degree, business owner). One way to change attitudes towards surveys, and thus drive participation, might be to show (as Borg's research suggests) that survey results may be surprising and different than expected.

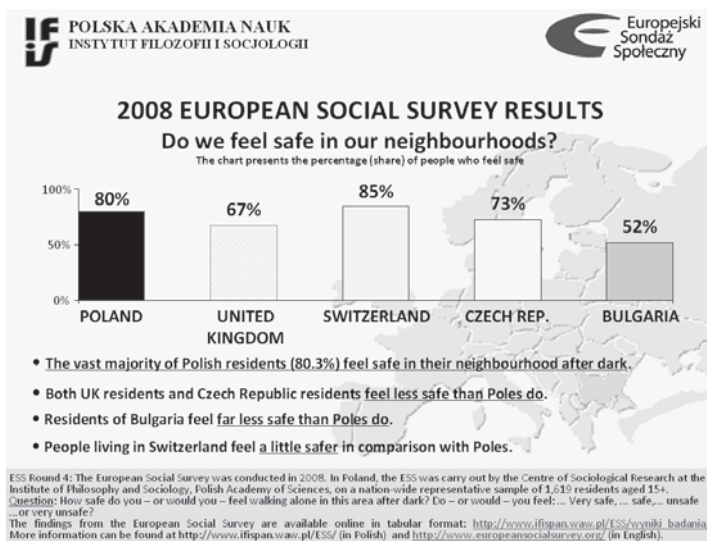
Inspired by this insight, the advance letters distributed before ESS 5 (conducted in 2010/11) contained an insert which was meant to show that survey results were

not necessarily obvious, i.e. that they might be completely different from what one might expect. The insert, developed in consultation with Ingwer Borg, contained two pages: the first page was intended to motivate the recipients to think about potential answers to the question, and the second page showed actual response distributions based on ESS 4. Both pages of the insert are shown below (in English translation).

Insert used in ESS 5. First page.



Insert used in ESS 5. Second page.



The selection of the question to be included in the insert was crucial. It had to be of interest for the public and, obviously, bring surprising results. Another important aspect was to take account of the emotions/excitement potentially evoked by the question. Research by Robert Groves et al. (2006) has shown that sampled persons are more likely to take part in a survey not only when they find the topic interesting but also when it additionally generates positive impressions and emotions. Bearing those findings in mind, we opted for a question concerning the sense of security in the respondents' immediate neighbourhood. We assumed that the belief in a low sense of personal security was widespread in Poland. Surprisingly, the ESS 4 findings showed that the vast majority of Poles felt safe in their neighbourhood and, moreover, their feelings were stronger in comparison with other countries. We selected countries which were potentially familiar to the recipients of the letter (i.e. visited or known from other people's accounts). One exception was Switzerland which is visited relatively rarely by Poles but considered to be among the safest and most stable countries. However, the sense of personal security in Switzerland is only slightly higher than in Poland. The ESS findings were intended to evoke positive emotions among the recipients. In order to facilitate the reception of the message, the insert contained an interpretation of the chart. Moreover, the insert was radically simplified, i.e. it only contained the information which directly served the intended purpose.

The mailing was prepared in a way to attract recipients' attention to the insert. Firstly, the letter contained highlighted information about it, using the attention-grabbing word **REALLY**. Secondly, before being put in the envelope, the insert was folded together with the letter, i.e. not as two separate sheets but as one letter consisting of two sheets of paper. This increased the chances for the recipient to take the insert out of the envelope and to look at it in the intended order, i.e. first page followed by the second page.

While no systematic research was conducted after ESS 5 to study the perception of the advance letter, yet the aforementioned 'mental labelling' of this survey by some sampled persons indicates that the insert could have generated more interest this time. As mentioned earlier, some sampled persons in ESS 5 who called us about the survey referred to it as 'the survey which has a question about the sense of security'. One might only wonder whether such mental labelling of the European Social Survey, as a side effect of the interest in the insert, is desirable. On the one hand, such perception of one of major surveys in Europe, conducted in Poland by the Polish Academy of Sciences, may be inappropriate as it narrows down its coverage and significance. On the other hand, however, if such mental labelling is connected with the belief that the survey focuses on issues that are interesting and important for the society, it should be viewed as appropriate. Naturally, based on a dozen or so short telephone conversations with the sampled persons one cannot

tell how common this perception of the advance letter was, or whether it was really connected with the belief that the problems covered by the ESS were important.

The findings from qualitative research discussed in this paper have two essential limitations. Firstly, it was conducted in connection with only one survey (ESS), and the survey was singular in itself in the sense that the ESS is a cross-national project and, moreover, it is conducted by the Polish Academy of Sciences i.e. an institution which enjoys prestige even among people who are reluctant about surveys.

Secondly, ESS is an iterative project. Consequently, it was possible to attach an insert with findings from its previous rounds and to show how those findings were used (publications and conferences).

Another limitation to the findings is that the in-depth interviews were conducted with hard refusers. Therefore, we have no information about other sampled persons i.e. what they remembered from the letter and how they reacted to it. However, hard refusals are the most common reason behind non-response, much more common than other reasons and, in particular, than non-contacts. Moreover, as evidenced by the invoked results from U.S. studies on the performance of advance letters, it is refusers that are targeted in studies on non-respondents. And it is this group that we aim to convert into respondents of our survey. Advance letters have a very limited impact on driving participation in other categories of non-respondents.

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The first draft of this paper was prepared for the ESS Field Directors' Meeting in Mannheim, 14–15 June 2010. Research for this paper was conducted under the ESS methodological research programme (Joint Research Activities) 'Improving Representativeness and Response' and under a grant from the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (163/N-ESS/2008/0). The author would like to thank the members of the European Social Survey Team in Poland, Franciszek Sztabiński and Teresa Żmijewska-Jędrzejczyk, who co-authored subsequent versions of advance letters used in the Polish ESS advance letters, as well as Henryk Domański for his comments on the first draft of this paper. Please send all correspondence to: Paweł B. Sztabiński, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Nowy Świat 72, Pałac Staszica, 00-330 Warszawa, Poland, e-mail: psztabin@ifispan.waw.pl